

Making the Colonial State Work for You: The Modern Beginnings of the Ancient Kumbh Mela in Allahabad

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In Prayag, Allahabad for modern India, it's the biggest show on earth, conceived by Hinduism's antique memory, co-scripted by mythology, history and tradition, and enacted by keepers of wisdom and seekers of moksha. It's the costume drama of nirvana and the passion-play of the East and the naked dance of asceticism and the hara-hara delirium of the hippie and the raw picturesque of pure faith rolled into one oversized panorama of India in its divine diversity—even in the digital age.

(Prasannarajan 2001, 51).

It is widely believed that the Allahabad Kumbh Mela¹ is an ancient religious festival or that it is "ageless," that its roots lie obscured in time immemorial. Editorials and articles in the press at *mela* time (every twelve years) lyrically emphasize the continuity of the pilgrimage throughout India's past, find inspiration in its durability and changeless character, and marvel at the anachronism of an ancient festival thriving in the modern world ("The Kumbh Mela," *Pioneer*, 17 February 1918; "Editorial," *Leader*, 16 January 1942; "Pilgrim's Process," *Times of India*, 24 January 2001). There is no better example of this than the oft-quoted section of Jawaharlal Nehru's will

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The research for this article was funded by the School of Social Sciences at La Trobe University as part of my Ph.D. dissertation. I would like to thank Robin Jeffrey, first and foremost, but also Richard Delacy, Asi Doron, Meg Gurry, Michael Milne, William R. Pinch, Sanjay Seth, and Tom Weber for their support, ideas, and suggestions. C. A. Bayly, D. P. Dubey, J. E. Llewellyn, Philip Lutgendorf, James G. Lochtefeld, and William R. Pinch have been most generous in sharing their sources, unpublished works, and thoughts with me. They are gratefully acknowledged in footnotes when due. Ghulam Sarwar at the Allahabad Regional Archives kindly translated the Urdu/Persian files. Thanks are also due to the reviewers of the *Journal of Asian Studies* for their constructive comments. Any errors are solely my responsibility.

"Kumbh Mela" might translate as "the festival of the urn." This urn, or pot, is said to be filled with a nectar of immortality (*amrit*), which is said to be accessible to pilgrims who bathe in the conjunction of the Ganga and Yamuna Rivers in Allahabad at *mela* time, approximately every twelve years, in the month of Magh (January–February).

The Journal of Asian Studies 62, no. 3 (August 2003):873–905.

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and testament, in which the avowedly secular modernist explains his desire to have a portion of his ashes scattered at the *triveni sangam*, the confluence of the Ganga and Yamuna Rivers and the site of the Kumbh in Allahabad:

I have been attached to the Ganga and the Jumna rivers ever since my childhood and, as I have grown older, this attachment has also grown. The Ganga, especially, is the river of India, beloved of her people. . . . She has been a symbol of India's age-long culture and civilization, ever-changing, ever-flowing, and yet ever the same Ganga. . . . And though I have discarded much of past tradition and custom, and am anxious that India should rid herself of all shackles that bind and constrain her and divide her people, and suppress vast numbers of them, and prevent the free development of the body and the spirit; though I seek all this, yet I do not wish to cut myself off from that past completely. I am proud of that great inheritance that it has been, and is, ours, and I am conscious that I too, like all of us, am a link in that unbroken chain which goes back to the dawn of history in the immemorial past of India. That chain I would not break, for I treasure it and seek inspiration from it. (2000, 612–13)

That this passage (which is not overtly written about the Kumbh) has been reproduced in so many Kumbh Mela-related publications is indicative of the chord that Nehru's affection for the site strikes, which is made more powerful because it is so palpably at odds with his political being.² In Nehru's articulation, modernity struggles with tradition, and in the opposition between what Dipesh Chakrabarty calls "the rational and the affective" (1995, 753),³ the Nehru whom we presume to know so well surprisingly succumbs to the emotion inspired by this "chain which goes back to the dawn of history in the immemorial past of India."

Such is the attraction and impact of the timelessness that is popularly attributed to the Kumbh Mela. Yet although the agelessness of the Kumbh is an important component of the way pilgrims perceive it, its actual historiography, generally speaking, is not. As William Sax puts it, "the historical origin of the Kumbha Mela is an open and indeed almost uninvestigated question" (1987, 402). It is not entirely remarkable that the history of the mela has not been investigated—with reference to Mircea Eliade, J. E. Llewellyn points out that "people seek in the sacred something transcending history, beyond profane duration" (1999, 7). Yet, clearly the history of the mela *is* important, since the ways in which the mela is remembered and interpreted rely upon an abstract notion of time and history—as inferred in the phrase so often used to describe the mela's continuity "from time immemorial" (*pracheen kaal se*). The agelessness of the mela in combination with its enchanted puranic origins and related stories—such as the presence of the unseen Saraswati River, which converges with the Ganga and Yamuna to form the three braids of the famed triveni—combine to inform pilgrims of the festival's sanctity.

Although some suggest that the Kumbh Mela in Allahabad goes back no further than the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries (Krasa 1965, 180), there has been no particular attempt to pinpoint a precise date and manner in which the festival began. This article attempts to isolate the genesis, or at least the beginning of the popular-

²This passage also appears in Singh 1980 (introduction); in "Mujhe ganga se prerana milti hai" 2001, 11; and in a magazine circulated at the 2001 Kumbh Mela, *Bandna: Mahakumbh Visheshank*. The latter two sources were kindly supplied by Asi Doron.

³Chakrabarty argues that this opposition has "generally affected Indian Marxist historians' attempt to understand the place of the religious in Indian public and political life" (1995, 753).

ization, of the Kumbh Mela in Allahabad. I argue that the Kumbh Mela was applied to Allahabad's extant Magh Mela in the 1860s by Pragwals (river *pandas* [priests] of Prayag [Allahabad]) working upon and within the limits imposed by the colonial state and its discourses. This process was inadvertently aided by the British, and the resulting mela was affirmed by *sadhus* (Hindu holy men) and pilgrims. The "ageless" Kumbh Mela in Allahabad was therefore made by a combination of actors, responding to the aggrandizement and growth of the modern state, particularly its infrastructure, administration, and preference for well-controlled, predictable, orderly, and traditional manifestations of religion. In this sense, the making of the Allahabad Kumbh is not merely another example of an invented tradition; indeed, had it been suspected of being invented in any sense, it would not have been accommodated by the British to the extent that it was. The Kumbh in Allahabad offers a complex illustration of how Indian actors, working with and reacting to British Orientalist assumptions, cast a major cultural and religious event. In carefully constructing a religious festival, they created for themselves a sphere in which they could enjoy some autonomy in the atmosphere of an increasingly repressive colonial state, despite postmutiny promises of freedom (Oldenburg 1989). By couching the modern Kumbh Mela in terms of an ancient tradition with a well-known past, Pragwals ensured that the Kumbh was not vulnerable to the intervention of the state, which had demonstrated its preference for tradition over innovation in the subject population. The ongoing strength and dynamism of the Kumbh Mela in Allahabad is an example of how Orientalist ideas "were adapted and applied in ways unforeseen by those who initiated them" (King 1999, 86), as colonial conceptions of Hindu religion, holy men, and pilgrims emanating from modes of British administration were appropriated by Indian actors to create a positive entity that, in turn, relied significantly upon British infrastructure and the government to succeed.

Mela Stories and Histories

An article in a scholarly book on Allahabad embarks upon its history of the festival with the words "*Kumbh Mela* started from the date of sea-churning ceremony" (Singh and Gupta 1990, 134). To dismiss this simply as belief will not do because belief accounts for a considerable portion of what holds together the Kumbh Mela. The *sagar manthan* (ocean-churning) story, which appears in a number of Sanskrit texts including the *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana*, and several *puranas* (old Hindu sacred texts) (Badekar 1976, 8), is popularly believed to provide the textual basis of the mela's origins. It tells of the battle between the gods and the demons for the nectar of life (*amrit*), which was produced from the churning of the milk ocean and was placed into a pot (*kumbh*). The coveted kumbh was carried over India by Dhanvantari, the physician of the gods, who, en route to Paradise, stopped in Prayag, Hardwar, Ujjain, and Nasik to rest, giving the mela its four venues.⁴ In other tellings, Garuda, or Indra in the form of Mohini, lets the kumbh fall to the ground, "thus sprinkling the amrita at many places on the earth" (Kumar 1984, 160–61).

⁴Prayag (Sanskrit: place of sacrifice) was renamed Allahabad (abode of God) by Akbar, but the city is still referred to as Prayag, especially in religious texts. There has been in the last decade a move to change its official name to Prayag, which implicitly emphasizes its status as an ancient Hindu city.

Studies attempting to uncover the history and origins of the Kumbh Mela have strongly argued that these stories have been relatively recently applied to the festival (Bonazzoli 1977; Bhattacharya 1977; Dubey 1987, 2001; Sax 1987). R. B. Bhattacharya concludes that "the Puranic legend has been forcefully grafted on the Kumbha fair in order to show Puranic authority for it. Though the incident of *amrita manthan* [churning for nectar] has been stated in several Puranic works, 'the fall of amrita in four places' has not been stated in any of them" (1997: 5). Indeed, Francis Wilford's (1812) account of the ocean-churning story, published in the early nineteenth century, does not mention the drops of nectar either.⁵ Mention made of kumbh in various *vedas* (old Hindu sacred texts), *puranas*, and *mahakavyas* (great epic poems) has also been taken to refer to the mela, but this is taking considerable license in translation (Tripathi 1997, 275).

The word *kumbh* refers not only to the pot of nectar spilt on its way to the heavens but also to the astrological sign Aquarius, which also represents the water carrier in Western astrology. In relation to the apparent astrological authority for the festival, Bhattacharya notes that "it is of great importance to note that there is no clear mention of the Kumbhayoga in astronomical works, dealing with the yogas [using constellations to define when a Kumbh Mela takes place]. It appears to be a later conception" (1977, 7). Furthermore, there is considerable disagreement among *joshis* (Hindu astrologers) regarding the incidence of the astrological constellation which ushers in a mela (Rathnasree 2001). This disagreement has resulted in two Kumbhs being held in Allahabad twelve months, not twelve years, apart, such as in 1941 and 1942 and in 1965 and 1966. There is also the frequent incongruity that the Kumbh Yoga constellation for the Allahabad mela does not coincide with the month of Magh, in which case the Magh calendar is upheld.⁶ In addition, the Kumbh festivals in each of the four cities are not necessarily held every three years, as is often stated. The last Hardwar Kumbh was in 1998, and the Allahabad Kumbh was in 2001, but the Nasik mela will be held in August 2003 and the Ujjain mela in May of the following year, 2004. The only Kumbh Mela of the four cities to be celebrated featuring Aquarius (kumbha) astrologically is the Hardwar mela, which has led scholars to argue that the mela first began there (Bonazzoli 1977, 118; Bhattacharya 1977, 9; e-mail communication from James Lochtefeld, 21 August 1998; Dubey 2001).

The other three festivals apparently have had the Kumbh tradition and story applied to preexisting local bathing festivals by enterprising *pandas* competing with India's other *tirthas* (holy places) for sacred status: "The practice of giving to favourite spots the names of celebrated foreign sacred places is common in Oojein and elsewhere," explained a nineteenth-century observer, with some deprecation. "By this

⁵The addition to the story of drops of nectar designating Kumbh sites might not have been in the account that Wilford used in 1812, as there are many accounts of the ocean-churning story in different texts; the story also might not have been interpolated at that time. Interestingly, Wilford in 1806 had discovered that the Pandit upon whom he had relied to translate documents for his series of essays on Hinduism had been freely forging the material. In some cases, the brahman was variously found to have made minor interpolations, "more material alterations," and in other cases had simply written legends "from memory," a shocking and humiliating discovery for the British Orientalist, whose quest was to document Hindu religious practices. Clearly, his methodology did not and could not accommodate oral traditions (1806, 249–53).

⁶N. Rathnasree, the director of the Nehru Planetarium in Delhi, writes that, according to the Kumbh Yoga, the mela in 1989 should have begun in mid-March, not in the beginning of January (2001, 5). Magh coincides with the months January through February in the Western calendar.

simple process, the Hindu thinks to concentrate a quantity of holiness into a small space, and needy, feeble, or business-bound piety indulges in the plausible consolation of worshipping at home and at ease, the objects of a difficult and expensive pilgrimage" (Conolly 1837, 815). Like Allahabad, Nasik and Ujjain are noted in nineteenth-century literature to be pilgrimage sites of long standing, but their melas are not specifically designated as Kumbhs (Hamilton 1850; Hamilton 1828, 2:293, 340–44).⁷ Today both the Ujjain and Nasik melas are still locally known as Singhasth Mela, in reference to the prominence of Leo in their respective constellations (Samanta 1985, 48); the most recent *Nasik District Gazetteer* does not speak at all of a Kumbh Mela in its jurisdiction (1975, 960), indicating that the Kumbh tradition there has not been broadly accepted. Despite academic aspersions that the ocean-churning story and the Kumbh Yoga have been relatively recently adapted or adopted for the purpose of mela making, in Allahabad the annual Magh Mela has been designated as a Kumbh every twelve years, and Ardh (half) Kumbh every intervening six.⁸

The antiquity of the Kumbh Mela in Allahabad is usually sealed with reference to the account of the Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang in the seventh century. His record that the festival that he witnessed in Allahabad occurred every five years, however, has raised doubts among some academics that it was a Kumbh that he described. The most recent book on the Buddhist pilgrim underplays his visit to Prayag and describes the festival as one of alms giving, rather than one of bathing in a holy river, the principal characteristic of a Kumbh Mela today (Wriggins 1996, 154). In addition, Xuanzang does not use any word corresponding to *kumbh* in his account; the festival was convened by the Emperor Harsha, not by sadhus or brahmins; and the festival that he describes is Buddhist in nature, with an image of Buddha central to the rituals and Buddhist monks being favored over "heretic" Hindus (e-mail communication from Lochtefeld, 11 October 2001). Interestingly, when arguing in legal battles for their historically established right to conduct rituals and accept donations from pilgrims, Pragwals have used the account of Xuanzang not to establish the historicity of the Kumbh Mela per se, but to establish the very existence of a religious fair in 643 C.E. (Caplan 1982, 179).

The conflation of the Magh and Kumbh Melas has become quite common and has been reiterated so many times that it has become widely accepted that the Kumbh Mela is as old as the Magh Mela. In his *Discovery of India*, Jawaharlal Nehru mused:

In my own city of Allahabad, or Hardwar, I would go to the great bathing festivals, the *Kumbh Mela*, and see hundreds of thousands of people come, as their forebears had come for thousands of years from all over India, to bathe in the Ganges. I would remember descriptions of these festivals written thirteen hundred years ago by Chinese pilgrims and others, and even then these festivals were ancient and lost in an unknown antiquity. What was the tremendous faith, I wondered, that had drawn our people for untold generations to this famous river of India?

([1946] 1999, 51)

Other historical accounts which have been used to infer the antiquity of Allahabad's Kumbh Mela have also proved to refer in the original source to the Magh Mela. An example of this is the claim that the Bengali mystic Chaitanya visited the

⁷The archival reference (R. M. Hamilton 1850) was kindly supplied by William R. Pinch.

⁸While the Kumbh Mela finds authority, albeit interpolated, in religious texts and astrology, the Ardh Kumbh Mela has no such authority or justification, but is well established in practice (Dubey 2001, 134).

Kumbh Mela in 1514 C.E. (Ghurye 1964, 160). Yet, the original Bengali source, *Chaitanya Charitamrita*, states that the mystic attended a Magh Mela, not a Kumbh (e-mail communication from Lochtefeld, 21 August 1998). Similarly, Fanny Parks's account of the Magh Mela in the 1830s has been footnoted by her twentieth-century editor, Esther Chawner, who helpfully informs the reader that every twelve years the mela is a Kumbh and is consequently much larger, even though there is nothing in Parks's account that so much as hints at this ([1850] 1975, 488). In his thesis on the Allahabad Kumbh Mela in the nineteenth century, Warren E. Fufeld, finding that his otherwise rich sources from the American Presbyterian Mission in Allahabad do not mention Kumbhs, deduces that the large mela in 1840 would have been an Ardh Kumbh Mela because two particular sects of sadhus were noted to have attended it and only did so every six years (Fufeld 1974, 24).⁹ Allahabad, however, was part of an extended pilgrimage circuit in northern India, linking towns such as Banares (Varanasi), Gaya, and Hardwar and probably took its reference point from the melas in Hardwar (W. 1840, 244). Moreover, the abolition of the Pilgrim Tax in 1840 led to a surge in pilgrimage,¹⁰ to the chagrin of missionaries who had argued strongly for its repeal, and attendance at all of the melas in Allahabad from 1838 to the mid-1840s was consistently large, making the distinction of a Kumbh Mela based on attendance alone impossible.

There are references to an annual mela, as opposed to a duodecennial mela, observed in Allahabad in texts such as Tulasi Das's sixteenth-century *Ramacharitamansa* (Hill 1971, 28).¹¹ The *Khulasat-ut-Tawarikh* (or *Khulasatu-t-Tawarikh* in Jadunath Sarkar's terms), a description of India under Aurangzeb composed between 1695 and 1699 C.E., also mentions a yearly mela in Allahabad (Sarkar 1901, 27); significantly, the same text acknowledges the Hardwar Kumbh Mela in an earlier passage (19).¹² The *Yadgar-i-Bahaduri*, dated c. 1833 C.E., also discusses Prayag's sanctity at length and clearly states that the mela takes place every winter in Magh, "when the sun enters the constellation of Capricorn" (Elliot 1833, folio 303).¹³ There seems to be enough evidence to suggest that the Magh Mela, or at least the tradition of a religious festival at the Triveni, is exceedingly old but that the Kumbh Mela at Allahabad is much more recent (Dubey 1988, 61; Mehta 1970, 81).

A related problem in historiography and also evident in Nehru's musings is the sweeping conflation of the Hardwar Kumbh Mela with melas in Allahabad. It was politically expedient for British administrators in Allahabad to draw upon century-old examples of disorder in Hardwar without differentiation when ruminating on the possible dangers of melas at Allahabad and advocating for tighter controls there

⁹Elsewhere in his thesis, Fufeld claims that there was a Kumbh Mela in 1839 (1974, 17 n. 22), which is at odds with his later assertion that the Kumbh was in 1840.

¹⁰The Pilgrim Tax was withdrawn in Allahabad in 1838, two years ahead of the legislation (*Act XXII of 1840*) abolishing the tax. Ritual suicides were believed to be committed in Allahabad at the triveni, which necessitated the immediate withdrawal of the East India Company's involvement, as missionaries argued that the government was profiting from the practice.

¹¹I am grateful to Philip Lutgendorf for bringing this text to my attention.

¹²The *Khulasat-ut-Tawarikh* was composed in Persian by Subhan (Sujan) Rai Khatri. James G. Lochtefeld, the author of the most substantial monograph on Hardwar to date (1992), argues that the earliest mention of the Hardwar Kumbh Mela appears in this text (e-mail communication from Lochtefeld, 21 August 1998). Thanks are due to Richard Delacy for making the *Khulasat-ut-Tawarikh* available.

¹³I am most grateful to C. A. Bayly for bringing this interesting manuscript and its whereabouts to my attention.

(Conybeare 1888; Nesfield 1885, 87). This conflation failed to concede the fundamental differences in the respective histories of the two melas, some elements of which were still evident, particularly in the early nineteenth century. In Hardwar, Kumbh Melas were characterized as large religious meets in which the trade of valuable commodities, such as livestock, was a significant component of the activity. The Kumbh at Hardwar was controlled, until the cession of the region to the British in 1801, by sects (*akharas*) of militant sadhus who contested for this privilege in battles of truly alarming scale. By contrast, Allahabad's sacred ground was located at the base of the Fort of Allahabad (see map). The literally towering presence of this base of military power over the *sangam* (confluence) made a considerable impact on the nature of the mela in Allahabad.¹⁴ Akharas naturally found Hardwar to be a more appropriate place to joust and contest hegemony—a place where they would be unchallenged by a third party. There is much evidence to suggest that sadhus in large numbers visited and worshipped at Allahabad prior to the region being ceded to the East India Company, and some akharas were (and remain today) based in Allahabad. In 1750 militant Gosains led by Rajendra Giri, who performed religious ceremonies at the sangam at the time, were drawn into a conflict to help protect the holy city from the invading army of Ahmad Khan Bangash (Sarkar 1958, 126–29; Barnett 1980, 56; Pinch 1998), but their presence in Prayag at the time does not indicate a Kumbh Mela.

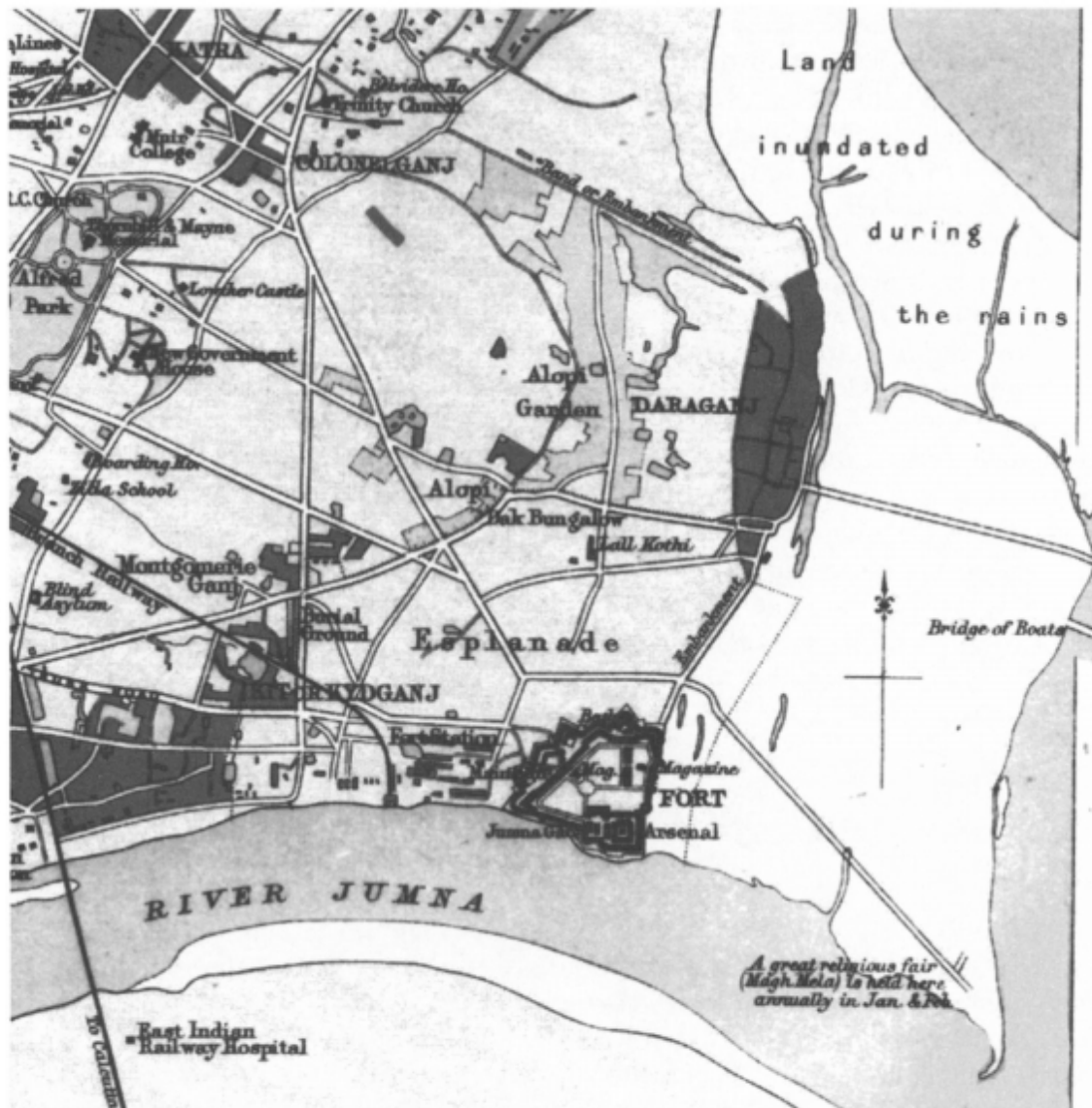
Pragwals and Pilgrimage

Pragwals, or Prayag wallahs, are the caste of brahman priests who aid pilgrims visiting Allahabad; their primary function is to guide the pilgrims through the rituals associated with a visit to Prayag.¹⁵ As a caste, they are related to other priestly *jatis* (subcastes) who perform similar services at holy places (*tirthapurohits*), such as the Gayawals of Gaya and the Gangaputras of Varanasi.¹⁶ Because they are required to minister rites to the dead and because they accept gifts for performing religious ceremonies, the Pragwals are considered to be low in the brahman hierarchy. Although Pragwals have had at times a reputation for cupidity ("Kumbh Mela Notes from Our Native Correspondent," *Pioneer*, 25 January 1882, p. 6) by charging pilgrims the highest possible price for services rendered, today they do not have such a bad reputation as do their counterparts in Ayodhya, the competing *tirthapurohit* *jatis* of Gangaputras and Bhareriyas, who are locally considered veritable ruffians (van der Veer 1988, 185–86). This is partly because the Pragwals enjoy exclusive rights to minister to Prayag's pilgrims and are a relatively coherent group. As a *jati*, the Pragwals have consciously striven toward maintaining their position through the Prayagwal Sabha, which functions as a kind of Pragwal union. Conflict between competing Pragwal families and negative public perceptions of them have been

¹⁴The Fort of Allahabad was built by Akbar between the years 1574 and 1583, and it remained a key strategic economic and military stronghold for Moghul rulers; in 1765 the East India Company was successful in negotiating the establishment of a garrison there.

¹⁵For a lengthy description of rituals performed at the triveni sangam, see Dubey 2001, 74–102.

¹⁶For a precise description of the functions of a *tirthapurohit*, with reference to those in Ayodhya, see van der Veer 1988, 183–267.



Map. Allahabad, c. 1900, with detail of Allahabad Fort and the Sangam, showing Pragwal villages Kydganj and Daraganj. Also note the mela grounds, as indicated in the lower right-hand corner of the map (*Imperial Guide to India* 1904, 98).

effectively addressed through the *sabha* (organization) (Boisvert 2002, 15). Pragwals claim that their exclusive right to serve pilgrims at the triveni was established by Akbar in a *firman* (imperial order) dated 1593 (Caplan 1982, 180).

Festivals such as the Kumbh Mela are generally not organic, spontaneous observances somehow embedded in the religious psyche of the people, as pondered by Nehru in *The Discovery of India*, but the result of long and hard orchestration by the pandas of the locality, whose business is to serve the incoming pilgrims. The Kumbh Mela is a profitable enterprise for the brahmans, and it has always been in their interests to create and maintain traditions and practices centering on their tirtha. Accordingly, as described above, scriptures have been drafted or interpolated into and circulated extolling the sanctity of the tirtha, describing everything from the religious

ceremonies to be observed to precise descriptions of the payment to be given to the officiating panda (Bonazzoli 1977, 83). That the authorization of the Kumbh Mela has been interpolated into books such as the *Magh Mahatmya* and *Matsya Purana* indicates the importance that the written word gained in Hindu practice, particularly in the colonial era. Richard King argues that this emphasis on textuality is partially the result of Western literary bias (1999, 102). The idea that all Hindu practice should find sanction in a holy book was one to which Orientalists clung, and they heaped scorn on those customs that did not meet this criteria and frequently used this as another reason as to why a particular religious rite was odious and aberrant and a further indication of the practitioner's ignorance—for example, the practice of sadhus proceeding naked at the Kumbh (Porter 1888).¹⁷ Consequently, practices recorded in texts were much more secure from colonial deconstruction; in this light, the interpolation of stories authorizing the Kumbh Mela was a wise move indeed.

In Allahabad, as elsewhere, the regular observance of melas was predicated on effective advertising by priests and their agents, known to the British as pilgrim hunters, who regularly penetrated villages across the breadth of the country, alerting prospective pilgrims to a particularly auspicious forthcoming mela.¹⁸ The British recognized that the Pragwals were the driving force behind melas, with one Christian missionary optimistically noting, as so many did, that “in a few years this great folly [i.e., pilgrimage to Allahabad] will get out of fashion, especially if the crowds of brahmins lose their interest in keeping it up” (*AJMM* 1840, 194). On the contrary, in the face of fears regarding the spread of Christianity and the corresponding decline of Hinduism, Pragwals fought back remarkably well.

Conflict between the river pandas of Prayag and the British began with the latter's attempts to regulate and profit from melas when Allahabad was ceded to the British in 1801 and, along with it, the right to collect taxes from pilgrims at the sangam (Prior 1990, 57, 72). Following established custom, the British outsourced the collection of the tax to “a native,” preferring not to intervene in the complexities of the tax collection, both practically, since the tax system that they inherited was not straightforward, and symbolically, in order to escape accusations in England that the East India Company was upholding heathen practices (Tennant 1803, 247). In 1806, however, these reservations were put aside, and the company took over the collection of the Pilgrim Tax, set the tax rate at one rupee per person (vehicles and other conveyances extra), and proscribed the collection of “all other duties, fees, or gratuities

¹⁷Some akharas hold that nakedness (*naga*) connotes a high state of consciousness, as the naga openly exhibits his detachment from the material pleasures of the world. Although the British were relatively successful in banning sadhu nudity in public arenas, within the religious context of the Kumbh Mela, in which large numbers of ceremonially armed sadhus were assembled, thousands of which were nagas, British notions of decency were impossible and impolitic to enforce.

¹⁸Although priests still travel to visit their clients and encourage them to make the pilgrimage, there are other mechanisms in place that attract pilgrims, such as the modern media, which effectively advertise the mela. During the last Kumbh Mela in Allahabad, held in January 2001, I received an e-mail a week before its end from the Uttar Pradesh Mela Authority: “Maha Shivratri is the last opportunity to be at Maha Kumbh 2001. If you miss it now, you would not get it for another 144 years. SPECIAL TARIFF, WITH FREE BOAT TO SANGAM” (Kumbh Village 2001). Not only have the means of advertising stayed abreast of the latest technological advances, but, more significantly, the advertiser has changed from priest to government, illustrating the general shift away from the mela as an event conducted by Pragwals to a governmental mela (see Llewellyn 1999).

at the ghaut within the fort" other than those of the government (*Bengal Regulations XVIII of 1810*). As Fanny Parks, a sometime resident in the Fort of Allahabad, noted: "Every man, even the veriest beggar, is obliged to give one rupee for the liberty to bathe at the holy spot; and if you consider that one rupee is sufficient to keep that man in comfort for one month, the tax is severe" ([1850] 1975, 162).

The Pragwals viewed the Pilgrim Tax as contrary to their interests—the more money extracted by the government from pilgrims, the less that was left for the Pragwals. On the British side, many—especially local administrators, who found organizing the mela onerous—thought that the expense of the Pilgrim Tax deterred pilgrims from making the journey to Allahabad. At the same time, the British recognized that they relied on the Pragwals to ensure a good crowd from which revenue could be exacted, which somewhat compensated for the burden that the mela represented. Thus, there was an uneasy reliance of the East India Company on the Pragwals. The former detested the latter's ruthless attempts to extort the maximum sum from pilgrims. Pragwal avarice became legendary, but it was, as a contemporary noted with irony, equaled by the government's determination "in squeezing those who come for salvation" (Archer 1833, 2:103–4).

Economic tensions aside, the insertion of the British authority into a Hindu landscape—the sangam—was clearly a disturbance for the pandas, who had enjoyed some freedom from intrusion during Nawabi rule, immediately before the cession of Allahabad to the East India Company in 1801 (Prior 1990). The Pragwals' resistance to colonial authority was noted (and the awareness of their vital role in attracting government revenue revealed) in 1815, when, in response to a new *chokidari* (surveillance) system of policing instituted by the British,

the class denominated Pragwals, who perform the religious ceremonies at the junction of the great rivers, to the number of 4 or 5,000, shewed a determination to resist, threatened to cease to officiate, and withdrew altogether, which would have caused a loss to the Government of the Pilgrim Revenue. Many other conspiracies to arrest the progress of the arrangements took place, but by patience and firmness were ultimately dissipated or suppressed.

(Hamilton 1828, 1:34)

After the abolition of the Pilgrim Tax, Pragwals were noted to "complain bitterly of the cessation of the tax; for they say that, though the visitors were so incalculably numerous, they could not get their usual fees, the argument used against them being, 'If the sarkar [government] lets us come free, what right have you to make claims on us?'" (AJMM 1840, 194). The Pilgrim Tax may have met its end, but the British continued to profit from melas by levying a range of tolls and taxes on traders and service providers, such as barbers and flower and sweet sellers, at the mela grounds. The tension between the government and the Pragwals reached a peak in June 1857, when, during the general confusion in Allahabad following the mutiny of the Sixth Native Infantry, Pragwals joined the rebellion.¹⁹

¹⁹The 1857 rebellion began as a revolt by Indian soldiers against their white officers in certain regiments of the East India Company's army. The mutiny first broke out in Meerut, with the refusal of a regiment to use the cartridges of the new Enfield rifles, which Indian *sipahis* (*sepoys*, or soldiers) believed were encased in beef and pork fat. An Indian sipahi, Mangal Pandey, opened fire upon a British officer who attempted to enforce the use of the cartridge, killing him instantly (hence, among the British in India, the term "pandey" or "pandie" came to refer to all mutineers). Pandey was hanged for his crime, and this catalyzed a revolt among

Before the outbreak, Pragwals were said to have been involved in perpetuating unrest in Allahabad by "playing upon the passions of people and making propaganda that the aim of the British Government was to convert people to Christianity" (Srivatsava 1979, 68). This is significant because, if Pragwals had been mobilizing people in Allahabad, we can assume that in all probability they were conveying this to their clients the pilgrims, so that this unrest would have spread effectively across India.²⁰ Writes the magistrate and collector of Allahabad, Mr. Court: "*The Brahmins amongst the Hindoos, the Moulvies and others amongst the Mussulmen, have, it is well known, proclaimed that it is decreed that British power is to close this year. . . . The poorer classes are thoroughly imbibed with this belief and as a consequence they work against us*" (1857, 15, emphasis in original). As these words were being written, Colonel Neill was embarking upon his notoriously brutal "pacification" of Allahabad.

Acting upon the animosity that they held for missionaries who competed, often rather aggressively, at the mela for the attention of pilgrims, Pragwals targeted and destroyed the mission press and churches in Allahabad during the rebellion (Report of Kotwal 1857; *State Versus Babu Pragwal* 1857; Owen 1859, 223). From the security of the cholera-ridden fort, J. Owen, a missionary with the American Board of Missions, noted in his journal that, upon entering Allahabad city, Neill's first action was to attack Daragunj, where "a nest of pryagwalas has been very troublesome in stopping the communication over the Ganges" by taking control of the bridge of boats (1859, 215–16). Days later, Owen reported that another Pragwal settlement on the Yamuna was fired at and many buildings were destroyed; their inhabitants dispersed (218). Once British control had been reestablished over the city, Pragwals were persecuted for their acts; some were convicted and hanged, and others were forced to flee Allahabad "to save their necks" (Chunder 1869, 305). According to Bholanauth Chunder, Pragwals had been resentful of the "restraints imposed upon their greed" and "had too anxiously desired to get quit of the Sahibs, whose presence hampered the free exercise of their rapacity." Many of the Pragwals, estimated by Chunder to be nearly fifteen hundred families, were thereafter forced to live as beggars in obscure towns and in jungles to evade capture. "Their difficulty," remarks Chunder, alluding to the Pragwals' reputation for extortion, "has become the pilgrim's opportunity" (305).

The surviving Pragwals were persecuted by a government devoid of enough proof to convict them but nonetheless convinced of their complicity in the events of 1857. Large amounts of Pragwal land in Kydgunj, in proximity to the pandas' place of work, the sangam, were confiscated and incorporated into the landholding of the fort cantonment; some of the confiscated land constitutes today's mela grounds (Khasra of Houses 1858; Confiscations in Keetgunj 1862). After the rebellion, contending with rumors that the government intended to convert all Indians to Christianity,²¹ the

other sections of the army in cities and towns in northern India. The unrest spread to elements of the civilian population, and the resulting rebellion shook the East India Company to its very foundations, with the crown eventually assuming full political control of company territories after the rebellion was quashed in 1858. Nationalist historians frequently refer to the uprising as the first battle of independence.

²⁰Interestingly, Anand A. Yang argues that melas in Bihar were the site of sedition in 1857: "[T]he major resistance movement against the British in Bihar in the Mutiny/Rebellion of 1857, organized by Kunwar Singh, is said to have been hatched by a gathering held at the Sonepur Mela" (1989, 18).

²¹For evidence of this in Allahabad alone, see Petition of a Native 1858. Similarly, the *Delhi Gazette's* Allahabad correspondent noted "a curious report" on 19 January 1858 that the government was about to force the Hindu and Muslim populations to convert to Christianity.

Pragwals, reduced in number, were left to rebuild their businesses. And they fought back admirably. Apparently no mela was held in 1858 due to the general turmoil, but by 1859 there was a small Magh Mela, despite governmental attempts to deny it.²² In 1860, after a large and successful Magh Mela, a British newspaper report noted, with not a little revulsion, that the Pragwals' flags bore anti-British signifiers:

The spot opposite the confluence is covered with rude flagstaves; and it is strange that upon the flags themselves there are many allusions to occurrences which one would little expect to see commemorated close to the fort, and just under the muzzles of its guns. One flag represents a set of black soldiers, whom it is easy to identify as pandies [mutineers], portrayed in the act of triumph over fallen enemies, and the faces of the slain are *white*. On another flag are seen a group of artillery men, engaged with a fort, which it is plain to see was intended to represent an English one. In every place are to be seen symbols of the bloody and cruel nature of heathenism, and it is not difficult to divine, from the scowls and mutterings of men as Europeans pass by, what they would do if they dared.

(*Allen's Indian Mail* 1860, 169, emphasis in original)

Flagstaves are used at the mela so that pilgrims can locate in the crowd the Pragwal that keeps their family records, and each Pragwal has a distinctive symbol. One could gather from this account that the images of the rebellion had been incorporated into the Pragwals' insignia.²³ The currency of the flags is an interesting one—Pragwals exploited their part in the rebellion apparently convinced that anti-British flags would excite more business.²⁴ More interesting is the bravado with which these flags were openly displayed in such close proximity to things British, particularly Allahabad Fort, which during the rebellion had proven itself as the base of British military power in the North-Western Provinces.

The following decade was to be a time of partly proactive, partly defensive actions for the surviving Pragwal community. In 1860, the Pragwal Sabha was formed and registered with the government, with the stated aims of protecting and preserving the "rights of its members to conduct rituals and accept donations" at the sangam (Caplan 1982, 179). Clearly, this was the action of a community under threat, attempting by organizational means to fight back against government attempts to curtail its traditional occupation, after the revolt had failed.

Tracing the Beginnings of the Kumbh in Allahabad

One could surmise that at this time Kumbh Melas were instituted at Allahabad or, if not instituted, then popularized. No governmental record before the 1860s that

²²The Magh Mela Report of 1861 noted that the melas in 1858 and 1859 "were not allowed to take place"; however, this expresses a desire to appear in control, rather than what was really the case (Johnston 1861). Other sources, however, such as the 24 February issue of the *Delhi Gazette*, indicate that in 1859 there was a mela (Campbell 1859).

²³See Caplan on the ways in which Pragwals' flags have been adapted to reflect the panda's family history: whereas traditional symbols on flags include chakras, gods, and auspicious objects, other flags bear images such as that of a radio, a railway, a cannon, and even the Union Jack (1982, 185).

²⁴An interesting footnote to this discussion is that today there remains a Pragwal whose flag bears a row of sepoy's bayonets. I saw this flag during the Magh Mela in 2000 but was unable to speak to its owner about its significance, as he was conducting a lengthy *visarjan* (ash-immersion) ritual.

I have consulted mentions the word *Kumbh* in any of its variant spellings in relation to melas in Allahabad, nor have these records ever mentioned that every twelve years the mela in Allahabad had any special significance. Given the depth of knowledge that the British sought about the Allahabad mela, necessitated by the perceived need to tax and control effectively the festival, which was so dangerously close to the fort, this is noteworthy. Legislation had been passed in regard to the Allahabad mela, notably *Regulation XVIII of 1810*, describing methods of taxation at Allahabad, and *Act XXII of 1840*, proscribing it. In surrounding debates it is not noted that every twelve years a mela occurred of such special significance that crowds are enlarged and, along with them, revenues and the scale of arrangements. Similarly, various gazetteers describe a mela at Allahabad, not a Kumbh (Thornton 1854, 82–83; Hamilton 1828, 1:31–36); missionaries who attended the mela from the early 1830s did not mention the duodecennial festival (W. 1840; JK 1841), nor did interested and inquisitive Europeans who lived in²⁵ or passed through Allahabad at the time of Magh Melas.²⁶

There are notably few Hindu sources among these, which allows for the possibility of concealment of the Kumbh from European intelligence or for mistranslations. Chunder, who visited Allahabad in 1860, notes, however, that “the especial great mela is held here every year on the full moon in January—*Maghai Prayagai* [in the month of Magh, go to Prayag], as the common Hindu saying goes” (1869, 304). Yet even he, a Hindu (whose command of the English language, its literature, and idioms led some of his readers to suspect that he was European),²⁷ does not use the word *Kumbh*. That Chunder, as a visitor to Allahabad, would be unaware of a larger periodic mela is unlikely, given his close contact with Bengali residents of Allahabad.

The East-India Gazetteer mentions a twelve-yearly festival at Hardwar (Hamilton 1828, 1:668), but in reference to Allahabad, it describes an annual festival which in 1813 had special significance not experienced for twenty-eight years, “on which account it became necessary to preserve the lives of the pilgrims from their own inconsiderate ardour” (1:35). Given that twenty-eight is neither a multiple of twelve

²⁵Fanny Parks’s detailed description of the fair has it as a *bura mela* (big festival) held annually, in 1832 ([1850] 1975, 227) and in 1833 (253–60). Parks’s account of the mela is particularly significant because she, a lady of leisure who habitually signed her name in Persian script, lived in Allahabad Fort for more than a decade during the years of her residence in India (1822–45). Parks was noted for her interest in Indian customs, to the point to which her European friends joked that any day they expected to see her bathing with the “natives” at the confluence (212). She attended a number of melas with her servants, who explained the scene to her. Parks was exceptional for the era in which she found herself—one of “airy disdain and flippant contempt” grounded in fear—which Percival Spear describes as being particularly prominent in the makeup of the British lady in India in the 1800s ([1932] 1998, 140). Illustrative of this point is the account of the sangam by Parks’s contemporary Harriette Ashmore, who described Allahabad as a city of “darkness” and “wretchedness” on account of the idolatry there and who could not “refrain from ridiculing some of the most outrageously deformed” deities at the mela (1841, 202–5).

²⁶For example, John Matheson describes the “Mag Mela” (1870, 344–45); Robert B. Minturn describes an annual mela (1858, 157); and C. J. C. Davidson gives a detailed description of the fair (1843, 317–26).

²⁷See J. Talboys Wheeler’s introduction to Chunder’s travels (1869, xi). Chunder, a Bengali traveler, is an interesting informant. At times he registers an ambivalence for things and ways Indian, perhaps in an attempt to reach out to his European audience—his writings were first published in the *Saturday Evening Englishman*—but an Indian patriotism and a Hindu leaning prevails, such as when he writes of his affection for the sangam: “It was not until standing upon that tongue of land, where the two holy streams have met, that we felt ourselves really in the city of *Allahabad*” (301).

nor six (which could indicate an Ardh Kumbh), one might conclude that, at this stage, Kumbh Melas had not been introduced into Allahabad. Another report related to the 1813 mela indicated that "many years may elapse before so great a concourse is again collected," indicating that in 1813 there was no discernible or predictable pattern in attendance at melas (Sands 1813). A further indication that the large 1813 festival was not a Kumbh Mela is furnished by the agent of Bundelkhand, who drafted an application on the behalf of Raja Bukht Singh and fourteen hundred of his retinue to attend this festival tax free. He explains: "[D]uring the fair of 'Mukur' [i.e., Makar Sankranti, the first auspicious day of the Magh Mela], . . . the observance of this ceremony at Allahabad is of the most important and beneficial nature in the religion of the Hindoos" (Agent of Bundelkhand 1812). Numerous applications of this nature were made at the time from the rajas of Poona, Nagpur, and Scindia. A similar request from the Raja of Chukaree reveals that "in the month of Magh the Fair and 'ashnan of Prag' (bathing at the confluence of the Ganges and Jumna at Allahabad), the chief of all our religious observances, will take place" (Raja Buji 1812). Again, none of these petitions from Hindu princes mentions a Kumbh or anything approximate to one in the princes' attempts to explain the sanctity and importance of the festival. The use of the superlative in both of these requests ("the most important and beneficial" festival) may indicate that the Magh Mela—not the Kumbh—was the most important festival in Allahabad at the time, although it was just as likely employed to guarantee the desired result of a tax exemption from the British.

The absence of the nomenclature *Kumbh* applied in relation to Allahabad, together with the failure of any of these sources to note a twelve-yearly mela cycle in Allahabad before the 1860s, is meaningful. By contrast, in the early nineteenth century, it was well recognized that in Hardwar "the waters of the Ganges are supposed to derive additional sanctity at the expiration of every twelfth year, and the concourse of pilgrims is much greater upon these anniversaries" (AJMM 1835a, 90). In British writings, this Hardwar mela was variously referred to as "Cumbha-Mela" (Raper [1812] 1979, 450), "Koom" (Archer 1833, 1:165), "koombh ca Mela" (AJMM 1833, 61), and "koomb ke mailah" (AJMM 1835b, 118), to mention but a few of the variant spellings. W. W. W. Humbley, writing in the 1840s, made comparisons between Allahabad and Hardwar as "two noted places of pilgrimage" but only attributed a twelve-yearly festival to the latter (1854, 302).

It is difficult to pinpoint a precise date when every twelfth Magh Mela in Allahabad became recognized as a Kumbh. The first mention of a Kumbh Mela in British administrative reports that I have been able to find, however, is in the closing discussion of an 1868 report about pilgrimage and sanitation controls, in which the Magistrate of Allahabad wrote:

In going through the correspondence that has taken place during my absence from the district, relative to the large native fairs held periodically in different parts of India, I have observed an omission in the correspondence which I now make haste to rectify. It is this—That in January, 1870, or 25 months hence, there will be the Coomb fair at this station, and the concourse of people will certainly be very great. . . . I witnessed the Ad Coombh four years ago when the concourse was immense. . . . The whole space below the bund to the confluence of the rivers, and for a great distance above the bund, was a mass of human beings; and owing to the proximity of the fair land to the fort, city and station, and the very narrow limits where all feel bound to congregate to bathe, the risk of an outbreak of disease is very great. . . . These fairs are European nuisances.

(Ricketts 1868)

Here, Ricketts is informing others in the provincial government about the Kumbh at Allahabad, then the provincial capital—had the festival been well established, an inquiry into pilgrimage and sanitation in the North-Western Provinces could not have proceeded very far without its mention.

Had there been a Kumbh Mela earlier than 1870, it would have fallen in 1858, and in the turmoil of the rebellion, what precisely happened that year is difficult to discern (Maclean 2001). In 1860 *Allen's Indian Mail* reported that that the Magh Mela of that year was “the largest to take place for the last five years. There was none the year after the mutiny, and a very poor one last year—the concourse of people near the fort being probably considered dangerous” (p. 133). In none of this discussion is there mention of a scheduled Kumbh Mela, nor in any Indian writings are there lamentations of a Kumbh foiled by the mutiny. Quick calculations indicate that an earlier Kumbh Mela in Allahabad would have fallen in 1846, but in the absence of any other textual evidence, we cannot be sure whether it was a Kumbh on the basis of crowd size.²⁸ The crowds in the 1840s were noted to be “ever increasing in number since the Government withdrew the pilgrim tax” to the point that in 1843, for example, the volume of pilgrim traffic was so great that the “Magistrate permitted them to pass for five hours over the bridges without paying fare [sic]” (*AJMM* 1843, 373).²⁹

In 1864 there was mention of an exceptional crowd, which would have been the Ardh Kumbh Mela referred to by G. H. M. Ricketts (1865), although this term was not so entrenched that it was used in government reports. Therefore, one could make the assumption that the first Kumbh to be celebrated in Allahabad was in 1870 and that the Pragwals had put in enough work to attract large crowds of pilgrims to it and to the Ardh Mela before it. In the 1870 report of the Magh Mela, the commissioner of Allahabad, J. C. Robertson, wrote that “this year, being a ‘Koombh,’ attracted an unprecedented crowd, [and] has passed without serious incident.” Interestingly, in the same year, the voice of the British in Allahabad, the *Pioneer*, still referred to the Kumbh as the “Magh Mela” when dryly commenting that the “very large surplus” that the mela had produced ought to be spent in Allahabad on “well-directed activity towards averting, or at any rate mitigating, the ravages of disease” that the mela attracted, although this may well be indicative of the general disregard that the conservative paper held for Indian society and its happenings (*Pioneer*, 31 January 1870, p. 1). There was still some British administrative confusion on the subject of melas in 1874, when Ricketts, by then Allahabad’s commissioner, wrote in the Magh Mela Report of that year: “We are in possession of very little information as to the causes which bring about a greater or less attendance at the fair in one year than in another, beyond the fact that every seventh year is more sacred, and there is a more numerous attendance of pilgrims and visitors, and consequently of merchants.”

What distinguishes a Kumbh from a Magh Mela today is that the former is

²⁸The apparent incongruence between the observation, made earlier in this article, that the British unreasonably favored Indian *textual* sources and the attempt to identify a Kumbh Mela registered in (predominantly non-Indian) writing is noted. Nonetheless, the volume of evidence in English-language texts in archives, travel writing, and missionaries’ records that suggests that the festival at the sangam was only known as the Magh Mela until at least the 1860s remains convincing.

²⁹This was not an uncommon occurrence at larger melas in Allahabad, and on one occasion, the British attempted to charge twice the price of the toll on the return journey to recoup the losses, much to the protest of pilgrims.

characterized by the institutionalized processions of sadhus, which are allowed, by a convention established by the British, on three bathing days over the period of the mela (Makar Sankranti, Mauni Amavasya, and Basant Panchami); these sadhu processions are an attraction for ordinary pilgrims who seek their audience (*darshan*).³⁰ For all of the reasons given above and because the report details the establishment of the order for processions of sadhus, one could conclude that the 1870 Kumbh Mela was the first to be celebrated in Allahabad (Elliot 1870). The officiating magistrate in 1870, J. C. Robertson, was openly relieved to have had a Hindu in Inspector Narain Singh to negotiate with the sadhus the order of procession (Robertson 1870). The order decided upon was close to the one observed in Hardwar, established as a result of the pitched battles between akharas, and so was probably translated, as was the mela itself, from there.³¹

Religious Traditions, Innovation, and the Postmutiny Colonial State

I should note that I have not found any source, Indian or British, which clearly states that the Kumbh Mela was observed for the first time in Allahabad in the mid-nineteenth century; the reader will have noted that the *absence* of any reference to a Kumbh in Allahabad before 1860 throws doubt upon the ancientness of the Kumbh festival in that city. The argument of this paper, however, is that application of the Kumbh to the Magh Mela was *necessarily* surreptitious. By appropriating a popular religious festival already well known—indeed, infamous—to the British and to their own city and by imbuing it with an immemorial past, the Pragwals sought not only to boost their business, but, more importantly, they attempted to create for themselves a sphere in which they could enjoy some autonomy from the increasingly repressive colonial state, which, after the mutiny and rebellion of 1857, had formally pledged not to interfere in traditional religious practices. As part of an accepted religious tradition, Allahabad's Kumbh Mela was unassailable in the eyes of British government, which had demonstrated its preference for tradition over innovation in the subject population.

³⁰Attempts by sadhus to introduce extra processions at melas were firmly resisted by the British, who found managing the processions of sadhus extremely challenging. By refusing to provide the infrastructure to manage a procession—in particular British manpower such as police and magistrates—the British were in effect denying sadhus the most important parts of the *tamasha* (spectacle): the dignity of being led by British officers and the cabaret of sadhus' resistance to that power. In one event in 1882, a sect of sadhus, having been delegated an Indian officer to lead their march to the Ganges, refused to proceed until it was accorded a British officer, who, to the sadhus' thinking, properly represented the sect's status.

³¹The established bathing order of the akharas at the Allahabad Kumbh Mela and Ardh Kumbh Mela in the late nineteenth century was (1) (Maha)Nirbanis, (2) Niranjani and Junas, (3) Bairagis (comprising Nirmohi, Digambar, and Nirbani subsects), (4) Chhota Panchayati, (5) Bara Panchayati and Bandhwa Hasanpur, and (6) Nirmali and Bindrabani (Benson 1882). This order has been disputed, particularly by the Bairagis, but only renegotiated a small number of times since, such as in 1906 after a riot among the Bairagi sects, after which the order of the Bairagi subsects was reversed on different bathing days. Sadhu processions continue to be vexed with disputes—for details on the 1998 and 2001 Kumbh Melas in Hardwar and Allahabad, respectively, see Llewellyn 1999 and Nandan 2002.

Although it is impossible to describe the precise process by which the Kumbh Mela was translated to Allahabad from Hardwar, given other evidence of Pragwals' attempts to popularize their tirtha, they almost certainly were the agents of this process, and sadhus and pilgrims embraced it. An earlier example of how easy it was for enterprising brahmans to introduce new elements into Hindu practice can be found in the case of the (re)discovery of sacred sites in Braj by Vaishnava reformers in the sixteenth century, who, finding only primitive forms of nature worship in their environment, reinterpreted the worship of trees, hills, and waters by relating them to various *lila* (pastimes) of the god Krishna (Vaudeville 1976). Once the British colonial government had extended its powers, however, changes or adaptations to traditional religious practices became harder to execute, as can be deduced from a tale recounted, not without sarcasm, in 1841 by a missionary:

It was well known that at Allahabad about twenty years ago, a pandit [brahman] gave out that "Kampani" [i.e., the East India Company] was a great goddess, whom the English people worshipped, and through whom they obtained all of their victories. A piece was written in Sanskrit in favour of this famous goddess—she was becoming exceedingly popular, and the amlahs [public officers] of the courts especially gave themselves to her worship—the pandit was waxing rich, and a temple was about to be erected, when the bubble burst, by a Missionary being appealed to, who described the "Kampani" as of earthly origin.

(JK 1841, 212)

A more overtly political example of innovation in religious practices in the late nineteenth century can be seen in the Ganapati festivals organized by Bal Gangadhar Tilak in Maharashtra. Tilak expanded the worship of the popular elephant-headed god, traditionally observed within a family or caste unit, into a public celebration, which came to resemble mass political rallies, with the chanting of anti-British and anti-Islamic songs (Barnouw 1954; Cashman 1990). Whereas the British had suppressed overtly political meetings with little hesitation, the blend of religion and politics in the Ganapati festivals created a loophole for Tilak and his associates, since the British were wary of intervening in the religious affairs of the subject population. Not until 1910, with Tilak imprisoned, did the British apply censorship restrictions to the Ganapati festivals in order to filter out seditious chants and songs (Barnouw 1954, 83).

Anand Yang writes of the establishment of new melas in Bihar over the last three centuries, some "sustained by the familiar calendar of festivals; still others fashioned their places on the local calendar by celebrating new sacred days, occasions born out of the new religious movements and cults centered on the changing pantheon of divine figures and deified heroes and heroines" (1998, 129). Yang later adds that notables such as zamindars, traders, pleaders, and *mahants* (religious figureheads) were the founders and patrons of "virtually every" major fair in the region (146–47). In Allahabad, by contrast, it was primarily the Pragwals who sought to boost the existing Magh Mela into a larger festival.

Pragwals were willing to be inventive in order to achieve their ends, as British reports from later in the nineteenth century reveal. In the 1880s, Pragwals were concerned that invasive and aggressive sanitary measures taken by the British (such as mandatory mass inoculation, forcible use of foul-smelling trench latrines, attempts to prevent overcrowding of large families of pilgrims in Pragwal lodgings, and compulsory quarantining and hospitalization of those suspected contagious) would dissuade pilgrim attendance. In response to this perceived problem, Pragwals spread

rumors that the forthcoming mela would be the last, as the Ganges was about to lose its sanctity (Porter 1888), a tactic which was also borrowed from tirthapurohiths in Hardwar (AJMM 1834, 245). Attendance at melas in the 1880s, however, was on the increase, although this was not simply as a result of Pragwal contrivance. The increasing ease of travel afforded by the rail, at the time extending its reach over the subcontinent, had much to do with the rising numbers of pilgrims to Allahabad. With this growth in pilgrimage came the corresponding extension of the power—economic and symbolic—of priestly communities such as the Pragwals (Prior 1990, 201). This power and influence were not merely local but also extended into client villages, where Pragwals and their agents visited in the off-season, to recruit fresh pilgrims and encourage return visits to Prayag, or to collect from pilgrims fees owed or loans extended during the mela. Frequently these loans were paid in kind or in land, so that Pragwal influence literally became rooted in local communities.³² Furthermore, as brokers in close communication with pilgrims, Pragwals played an important role in the indigenous information order that flowed along pilgrimage paths throughout India (Bayly 1996).

While the existence of only four places of Kumbh Mela are recognized, pandas at other places of pilgrimage have attempted to boost the status of their tirthas by adapting the Kumbh tradition to their local festivals, with varying degrees of success, further demonstrating the malleability of religious practices. Priests of Vrindaban have attempted to hold Kumbh Melas,³³ as have those of Kumbhakonam in the south.³⁴ This is done on the premise that, although there are four worldly Kumbhs, there are an additional eight that are *lokantar* (other worldly), and that Kumbhakonam and Vrindaban are counted among these because they are so sacred that they are not of this world (“Mujhe ganga se prerana milti hai” 2001). Perhaps the most successful bid for Kumbh Mela status outside the four acknowledged cities, however, is that of Varanasi, which, as Diana L. Eck describes, claims to contain all of India’s major tirthas within its sacred geography. Prayag is said to be contained in both Prayaga Ghat and Panchaganga Ghat, and Hardwar is said to be at Asi Ghat, where pilgrims are encouraged to imagine the Kumbh at mela times by the placement of “low wooden *chaukis* [platforms] where the riverside vendors and priests are, stacked high with *kumbhas*, the fat clay waterpots, representing the *kumbha* of old which held the nectar of immortality” (Eck 1992, 140–46). This strategy clearly enjoys some success, which is evidenced by the crowds bathing in Varanasi in 2001 during the month of Magh, despite the fact that the widely lauded first Kumbh Mela of the millennium was being conducted a mere four hour train ride away (“Devotees Take Holy Dip,” *Times of India*, 10 February 2001).

In this light, the application of the Kumbh Mela tradition to an existing religious festival—the Magh Mela—can be seen as an attempt by Pragwals to expand the fame of their tirtha. The environment of the later nineteenth century was not a favorable

³²See Anita Lee Harrison Caplan’s figure 5.5 (1982, 188) for a map of India indicating Pragwal regions and territories. Pragwals are fluent in the language of their client territories.

³³The *North Western Provinces Census* of 1891 notes that the “Kumbh Mela at Brindaban was one of the most considerable gatherings to be dealt with, but was not extensive enough to be really troublesome” (Nesfield 1885, 49). Thanks are due to Asi Doron for this reference. The Kumbh in Vrindaban also drew attention in 1915 (*Abhyudaya* 1915). Clearly the Kumbh Mela at Vrindaban enjoyed brief success; however, it has not been sustained.

³⁴Kumbhakonam is mentioned as the “southern counterpart” to the Kumbh Mela in the British-compiled *Alphabetical List of the Feasts and Holidays of the Hindus and Muhammadans* (1914, 149).

one for Allahabad's pilgrimage priests, a time when, recovering from an anti-Pragwal campaign after the rebellion, the mela was assailed with an aggressive missionary presence (Bayly 1975, 106; *Allen's Indian Mail* 1860, 133). The new government, despite promises of religious freedom, not only defended missionary labors at the mela but also voiced strong objections to pilgrimage on sanitary grounds, debating the wisdom of disallowing melas altogether. In addition, there were optimistic predictions that pilgrimage in India would, "as it did in Medieval Europe," soon "die out or decrease as the minds of the people become more enlightened and as their information is increased, as other modes of education prevail and as trading customs alter" (Simson 1868).

In such circumstances, instituting and promoting Kumbh Melas would have been a means of countering what Pragwals saw as the British antipilgrimage offensive. River pandas may well have rationalized that, rather than attract big crowds annually to the Magh Mela, they would be wiser to concentrate their efforts into regular periodic festivals, in the hope that pilgrims would be more likely to attend a larger mela every six or so years. This enterprise of the brahmans found a resonance in pilgrims, since, as Yang describes in the words of Ashis Nandy (1997), pilgrimage gained in status and currency in the colonial era: "In a period of flux, adherence to this practice, as has been argued for other religious and social practices, may well have represented a way of expressing 'conformity to older norms at a time when these norms had become shaky within'" (1998, 138–39).

The demographic of pilgrims had changed in the nineteenth century from being princely and extremely wealthy to a more prosperous peasantry, with the result that, instead of relying exclusively upon princely patronage (which had, with the princes themselves, begun to decline), places of pilgrimage had to adapt to suit their new clientele (Prior 1990, 85). In 1868 the district magistrate of Allahabad noted that at the Magh Mela "the attendance consisted chiefly of the middle and lower classes of people and no Rajas attended this year as they generally have done and their absence has affected the profits of Pragwals and the traders" (Magh Mela 1868). For increasingly prosperous villagers, attending the mela was a means of expressing their status. Not only did pilgrimage still carry the aura of the elites, who, in former times, were the only ones who could afford to embark upon what was an expensive and dangerous enterprise, but establishing ties with a priest at a major pilgrimage center gave enterprising peasants the opportunity to document their family and property. Lineages could be claimed and inscribed into Pragwal registers, as could claims to land ownership, which could be used as evidence in court cases should any dispute ever arise (Fusfeld 1974, 20).

The inadvertent British impetus behind the popularization of the Kumbh Mela can be seen as an example of Bayly's observation of the irony that a "supposedly Christian Empire presided over a substantial reinforcement of Hindu practice, a virtual reinvention of tradition" (1981, 149). The actions of the British, in trying to control and regulate their territory and the mela, played an important role in not only establishing but also boosting the Kumbh Melas held within their jurisdiction. This was indeed ironic, given the general British consensus that melas were dangerous "nuisances" to British society in India, attended by "mischief" that ought not be encouraged (Neale 1882). A number of inquiries into the burgeoning pilgrimage trade and the strain that this was causing on the British administrative apparatus were carried out, invariably looking at ways in which pilgrimages could be restricted.³⁵

³⁵There were formal inquiries in 1868 and 1913 and regular informal incursions into the evils of pilgrimage before, in between, and after.

There were few supporters of pilgrimages among the British, although one is worthy of mention, the lieutenant-governor of the North-Western Provinces (1868–74), William Muir, whose account is notable for its perceptiveness:

His Honour [Muir] would abstain from actively discouraging the fairs, because in his opinion, they are attended with much good. There can be no question that they benefit trade, promote friendly intercourse between people of different parts of the country, gratify the longing to see the wonders of other lands, and to escape for a time from the dull, narrow routine and the stagnation of village life, and tend to develop the intelligence of the people and enlarge their notions.

(Simson 1868)

Although this point was not appreciated by more conservative administrators, the consensus was that festivals such as the Kumbh Mela were held so dear to the Hindu public that it was impolitic to interfere with them.

British attitudes toward religion itself no doubt helped make the Kumbh Mela the singularly important event that it seems today among a myriad of melas, festivals, pujas, and other observations (Cantwell Smith 1991; Asad 1993; King 1999). We have already seen that two rajas seeking permission to attend the mela in 1813 specifically couched their request in terms of the mela being the *most important* among all religious observances of the Hindus. Similarly, the superlative sanctity of the sangam at Allahabad is evident in the fact that its waters were used “in the English courts of justice, in administering an oath to a Hindoo” as an unlettered equivalent to the bible (Parks [1850] 1975, 260). For Hinduism to be appreciated and respected by British administrators, it was frequently required to take on the rather monolithic shape of Christianity—that is, Hindu rituals were to be expressed in terms of Christian parallels. The Kumbh Mela was particularly well suited to such catholic interpretations because it was not overtly dominated by any particular deity and, since the nineteenth century, had accommodated all streams of Hinduism with relatively little conflict. Paradoxically, a reified Hindu festival such as the Kumbh Mela could contain heterogeneous practices. While some rituals received tacit approval of the authorities,³⁶ other practices were banned, such as hook swinging and religious suicide. Other aspects of the mela were highly regulated, such as the processions of sadhus; others still were barely tolerated, such as sadhu nudity. In this way, the British conception of what constituted religion reigned at the Kumbh Mela (Maclean 2003, 116–55).

While arguing for religious freedoms, Indians learned to appeal in terms that could be appreciated by their Christian colonizers. In 1882, toward the end of the Kumbh Mela, cholera was detected, and the magistrate in charge decided that the mela should immediately be broken up. A number of sadhu akharas who had taken the oath of *kalpavas*, which required them to reside at the sangam for the entire month of Magh, refused to be dispersed by the Sanitary Police. The Vaishnava Bairagi sect in particular proved to be belligerent, and in an attempt to remove its members, the

³⁶The British administration at the mela also profited from some rituals, well beyond the abolition of the Pilgrim Tax. Not only did the British charge a tax on barbers shaving pilgrims' heads, but the hair—in particular the long locks of women—was gathered and sold, unbeknownst to pilgrims, to British wigmakers, with a portion of the profits going to the treasury and receipted in the Magh Mela expenses (Robertson 1874). The practice was discovered by the public in the 1880s, and outrage expressed in the local papers led to its end (“Kumbh Mela Notes from Our Native Correspondent,” *Pioneer*, 25 January 1882).

police isolated the sect's mahant, tied him to a pole, and threatened to whip him if he did not direct his followers to leave. A particularly savvy "native correspondent" for the *Pioneer* later denounced the authorities: "Think of a Roman Catholic Bishop treated in the same way in Ireland for reasons of sanitation!" ("Kumbh Mela Notes from Our Native Correspondent," *Pioneer*, 25 January 1882, p. 6).

Although the British probably did not go so far as to construe "vagrant" sadhus as bishops—and, incidentally, our correspondent lost his job for using the *Pioneer* as a platform to castigate the mela's administration—the use of language could and frequently did change the object perceived (Cohn 1996), and the effects of this were to be seen at the mela. The word "fakir" was used by the British to refer to both Hindu and Muslim religious orders, and the itinerant mendicancy that defined these castes—to the castes a religious duty—could only be begging, which was their designated occupation in census reports (Nesfield 1885, 87). On other occasions, by designating sadhus as holy men, the British sought to redefine and emphasize the role of sadhus from that of economically and militarily powerful trader-warriors to that of relatively passive monks concerned only with spiritual affairs (Pinch 1996). Accordingly, a Kumbh Mela carefully controlled by the British could provide a venue for relatively harmless spiritual discussion. This took on political hues in the early twentieth century as sadhus were exhorted to join and even lead the freedom struggle, and in 1954, at the first Allahabad Kumbh to be held in independent India, sadhus did indeed convene a "spiritual parliament," offering their perspectives to Nehru's cabinet ("Spiritual Parliament: Cultivate Life of the Spirit," *Leader*, 6 February 1954).

State, Sadhus, and Pilgrims in the Making of the Mela

By no small measure did the British administration of these festivals make them a success in comparison to pilgrimages to tirthas outside British territory. Colonial government intervention in melas, although often controversial, generally made the melas safer, which consequently encouraged pilgrim attendance. In 1820, following a disaster at the Hardwar mela in which 485 died, the British began complex and expensive works on the bathing ghat, which involved a veritable quagmire of negotiations with pandas and sadhus, with the object of never allowing such a tragedy to occur again (Bathing Ghat at Hurdwar 1821). Writes one native gentleman, "I do not know of anything which has impressed upon the minds of the people of India the greatness of the British and the advantages derived from their rule, as their admirable arrangements for keeping peace &c. at the Hurdwar Fairs" (Baboo Sivaprasad 1868). Even the routes to the festivals were improved; for pilgrims to travel through British territory by road, and by rail, as Bholanauth Chunder observes, was much safer because policing of these roads kept thugs and dacoits at bay (1869, 40). Not surprisingly, the exception to this was in the case of sadhus. They preferred to avoid British land because the treatment to which they were subjected—random searches and general persecution—was oppressive (Prior 1993, 32). This was, no doubt, the intention of the government, which at times felt pangs of obligation toward pilgrims but was never willing to take on any responsibility for the well-being of holy men: "There can be no doubt that most of these faqirs are merely a nuisance to, and a burden on, the pilgrim; no one could hold that it is the duty of Government to assist them," declared an inquiry into pilgrimage (*Report of the Pilgrim Committee* 1916, sec. C).

Of all of the British innovations and interventions, the advent of the rail in India made the most impact on the scale, and consequently the nature, of pilgrimage, making lengthy trips to distant cities faster, safer, and more affordable than ever before. This innovation was particularly meaningful for Allahabad; trader John Matheson noted that, with the completion of the railway, Allahabad would be rendered the "chief point of railway communication between the Bombay seaboard and the North Western Provinces, a great nucleus of goods transit and rendezvous of travelers to Upper India" (1870, 341). Road works had also brought Allahabad into easier contact with major north Indian routes—the Grand Trunk Road was opened to Allahabad in 1823, linking it to Calcutta and eventually to the western Doab. This development was enhanced in the first decade of the twentieth century, when a series of bridges linked Allahabad to its immediate environs—Rae Bareilly (the Paphamau bridge in 1905) and Benares (the Jhansi bridge in 1912)—replacing ferry services and bridges of boats.

The British seemingly accepted the adaptation of the Kumbh Mela to Allahabad readily, if indeed they considered it as an innovation at all. Both Hardwar and Allahabad were contained within the same province under its various names.³⁷ Administration of melas was a provincial concern; that is, the same people—such as the sanitary commissioner and often the lieutenant-governor himself—were involved in overseeing the Hardwar melas as those in Allahabad, although the respective district magistrates and commissioners of the district did the work on the ground, assisted by the police. The constant turnover of these local authorities meant that they frequently relied on provincial authorities and records when organizing the mela to ensure continuity and consistency between mela conventions and practice. The position of the North-Western Provinces sanitary commissioner was most important in this regard. Charles Planck, the incumbent for nearly two decades (1868–85), was an authoritative officer with an eye for detail, experienced in mela matters across the province. The translation of the Magh Mela into a Kumbh Mela in Allahabad did not alert provincial authorities such as Planck to any connivance, something to which they were generally hostile and for which they were on the lookout.³⁸ The conflation of the Hardwar and Allahabad Kumbh Melas in administrative quarters indicates the relative ease with which Allahabad was recognized as a Kumbh city by the British. Indeed, it was wise for the Pragwals to import the praxis of Hardwar to their city because, by couching their mela in terms of an established practice, the Kumbh Mela was theoretically unassailable, whereas any invention would have been briskly terminated by the British, as was the case for the goddess Kampani.

³⁷These are the North-Western Provinces, the North-Western Provinces and Oudh, the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh, and, finally, Uttar Pradesh (U.P.). The Allahabad and Hardwar Kumbh Melas were both held in the same province until the creation of the new hill state of Uttaranchal in 2000, which includes Hardwar. The Kumbh Mela was central to the controversy that surrounded Hardwar's inclusion into the new state. The symbolic value of Hardwar to both U.P. and Uttaranchal aside, U.P. felt that the new state could not afford to host a Kumbh (which in 1998 had cost the U.P. government Rs 120 crore [a crore is Rs 10,000,000]). The border, initially proposed to run through the Kumbh *kesetra* (area), had to be redrawn because of the lack of expediency for the one Kumbh Mela to be held in two states by two provincial governments. Hardwar is also a crucial point in the control of the Ganga, and so the politics of water distribution was also important to the issue (see Robinson 2001).

³⁸For example, innovations taken up by sadhus (as seemingly trivial as bearing an extra flag) were frequently rejected by British authorities on the grounds that there was no precedent for them. At the same time, objections to missionaries at the mela in the 1880s were rejected on the grounds that missionaries had always preached there (Porter 1888).

The part of sadhus, as important players in any Kumbh Mela, in the creation of new festivals needs to be explained with reference to their historic role in Indian society. Before the consolidation of East India Company rule in northern India, the Hardwar Kumbh was controlled by highly competitive groups of akharas. The nature of the Kumbh reflected the role of the sadhus in Indian society at the time. Sadhus were not merely religious mendicants but also astute traders, carrying valuables such as gold, silk, and spices along pilgrimage routes as they passed from one sacred city to another (Cohn 1964, 177). Periodic festivals such as the Kumbh Mela doubled as markets for the trader-sadhus to sell their wares. Until the late eighteenth century, they also acted as mercenary warriors, using skills that they most likely attained as a necessary means of defending their wares and assets, which were considerable (Pinch 1996). One indication of sadhus' prosperity was that by 1750 some of the largest holdings of land in key pilgrimage cities of India were owned by religious *maths*, groups similar to sects (Bayly 1998, 126–27). As religious figureheads, competent warriors, and influential economic players, sadhus enjoyed a powerful and privileged position in Indian society, nonchalantly receiving the worship of the people on their travels.

In previous centuries, the Hardwar Kumbh Mela was the arena in which these sadhu akharas battled for economic and spiritual supremacy, with the victorious sect winning the right to control the mela and collect lucrative taxes (Hamilton 1828, 1:668). The triumphant akhara then ceremonially flaunted its newly gained status by being the first sect to enter the sacred waters of the Ganga on the most auspicious bathing day. These battles were well entrenched in the British administrative imagination and were frequently recounted with instructive purpose, as the thought of angry sadhus turning their weapons against the British did not require a great leap of imagination. In 1888 a battle that had taken place more than a century before between rival sects in Hardwar was instructively recounted by the magistrate in charge of the Allahabad mela, who was defending the necessity of British involvement in the mela's administration: "On this point, I will venture to refer to what took place under native rule at the great Kumbh Mela of Hardwar in 1760. 'An affray,' writes Elphinstone, 'or rather a battle, took place between the Nagas of Shiva and those of Vishnu, in which it was stated on the spot that 18,000 persons were left dead on the field.' The amount must doubtless have been greatly exaggerated; but it serves to give an idea of the numbers engaged" (Conybeare 1888, referring to Elphinstone 1849, 60). Death and danger had become incorporated into understandings and expectations of pilgrimage and not only in British quarters. In 1850, at an Ujjain mela, a British observer noted that the frequent clashes among sadhus there and the consequent loss of life had been incorporated into the belief held by locals "that unless the Gods are propitiated on these occasions with [an] abundance of pilgrim gore, a general pestilence will inevitably ensue in the city and its environs" ("The Great Fair of Oojein," *Delhi Gazette*, 12 June 1850).³⁹ In Hardwar, the end to akhara warfare rendered the mela a safer place for pilgrims, encouraging their attendance: "Owing to the precautions taken by the British Government, the fairs at Hurdwar have, for many years past, ended without bloodshed, to the astonishment of the vast multitude assembled, who were formerly accustomed to associate the idea of fighting and murder with that of the pilgrimage to Hurdwar" (Hamilton 1828, 1:669).

The battles between akharas in the eighteenth century are said to have characterized Kumbh Melas, yet none of these battles are reported to have taken place

³⁹This article was kindly made available by William R. Pinch.

at Allahabad.⁴⁰ Akbar's fort was first garrisoned by British troops in 1765 as part of the Treaty of Allahabad among the East India Company, Emperor Shah Alam, and the Nawab of Awadh, Shuja-ud-daula. Had any affray taken place at the sangam, we can be fairly sure that it would have been recorded and reproduced in British records, since any conflict of such scale as that described by M. Elphinstone (1849, 60), in the close vicinity of the Fort of Allahabad—a key center of military power in northern India—would certainly have attracted attention and alarm. There was at this time some consternation that, “under the pretence of pilgrimage, . . . the provinces [of Korah and Allahabad] have been annually visited by the sunnassies [sadhus] and in former times they have appeared in it [*sic*] in bodies of fifty thousand men, but their ravages have never been marked by any very bad effect on the collections or the peace of the country” (Secret Department 1773, 198). Aside from British reports of cold conflict between akharas on mela days in the later nineteenth and early twentieth century, in which shoes were thrown and insults traded (Report on the Allahabad Magh [Kumbha] Mela, 1906), no conflicts between sadhus were recorded to have taken place at the site of the mela in Allahabad.

While sadhus no doubt attended melas at Allahabad in large numbers, evidence would show that the trade component of that fair was rather petty, comprising trinkets, homewares, and “articles of the most trifling value, but of every possible description” (Davidson 1843, 319), in comparison to more expensive wares such as the elephants, camels, bullocks, and horses of Hardwar.⁴¹ This explains in part why Allahabad did not attract as large a gathering of trader-sadhus and as a result escaped the sadhu battles with which Hardwar was synonymous in the eighteenth century. Furthermore, the scale of the Hardwar festival before the 1800s and the corresponding reward if an akhara was to win the right to tax the pilgrims inflated the stakes of sadhu warfare. By contrast, in Allahabad, Moghul rulers ensconced in the fort had established the right to tax pilgrims. That this had not been questioned by militant sadhus in Allahabad indicates that the mela was so comparatively small and the Moghuls so well entrenched—the Fort of Allahabad looming above the sangam declaring Moghul (later Nawabi) sovereignty—that stakes there were not worth fighting for, even by the most skilled sadhu warriors.⁴² Here lies another indication that the Kumbh Mela was not established in Allahabad before the ascension of the East India Company.

⁴⁰The silence on the issue of sadhu battles in Allahabad in Ashok Tripathi's (1997) thesis on sadhus in Allahabad is in particular notable here because, if there had been any sadhu battles in Allahabad, Tripathi would have covered them.

⁴¹Compare the accounts of Davidson (1843) and Mundy (1832), both of whom visited both Allahabad and Hardwar fairs. Both emphasize the livestock, shawls, and spices at Hardwar, dwell less on the religious elements of the mela there, and give more of a description of the rituals performed at Allahabad, as well as an emphasis on the smallness of its mart. Captain Godfrey Charles Mundy in particular is dismissive: “[A]fter the Hurdwur fair, Allahabad had nothing of novelty to show. We passed down the whole street of booths, driving hard bargains with the retailers of trash; and, amongst other valuables, I purchased for one rupee a whole mythology of Hindoo deities” (1832, 147). By contrast, the Hardwar fair was authorized by the governor-general in Council as one of two fairs which constituted a “ready and favourable market” (Lumsden [1802] 1868, 102).

⁴²This is not to suggest that sadhus and Muslim rulers should have been natural enemies; indeed, in the eighteenth century Muslim rulers hired sadhu mercenaries to fight in their armies (Barnett 1980; Pinch 1998), and Peter van der Veer suggests that “in the time of Asaf-ud-Daulah the nawabi Awadh was as much a Hindu state as it was a Muslim one” (1988, 144).

The position of the sadhu in Indian society was to change with the encroachment of the East India Company. Originally a trading enterprise, the British presence in India altered trading terms and conditions in such a way that the position of sadhus as wealthy traders began to decline (Chatterjee 1984, 7). With the sadhus' decline in economic status followed an inevitable dip in their social standing. Through a combination of legislation and governmentality, sadhus were effectively disarmed and discredited. For example, *Act XXII of 1840* proscribed the extortion of alms by "offensive and disgusting exhibitions and practices," which was intended to limit public "outrage when police act upon vagrants," as the government had labeled sadhus, and to sever any Hindu public sympathy for them.⁴³ J. N. Farquhar outlined the changes to militant ascetics under British rule in his paper "The Fighting Ascetics of India":

When the British became supreme in India, the armed ascetics in most cases gave up all attempts to live as soldiers and settled down in cities or on the land. For many decades they retained their arms and frequently used them. . . . By the middle of the nineteenth century most of the fighting groups had given up the old life; for the British administration does not allow men to wander about the streets naked, nor do they permit people to carry dangerous arms about, unless they have government licenses.

(1925, 449–50)

After the British eroded the sadhus' social and economic role in Indian society, the only arena in which sadhus could enjoy their former status was in the Kumbh Mela, which, as a religious event, enjoyed a degree of immunity from governmental intrusion within the limits described above. At the Kumbh Mela, sadhus were allowed to parade naked and bear their arms, which, by the twentieth century, had become largely ceremonial. Periodic and prudish attempts by the government to wind back these privileges at the Kumbh were persistently met with defiant resistance by sadhus insistent on their autonomy in this space alone. William R. Pinch has argued that, although sadhu processions have evolved into "theatrical caricatures far removed from any real military function," their main significance today lies in their testimony to the martial potency of the Hindu ascetic (1998, 331). In this sense, the procession of sadhus at Kumbh Melas today resembles the "restored behavior" described by Richard Schechner, in which, through ritual or performance, an individual or group can restore a historically verifiable past, or even an imagined one, and in that way taste lost power (1985, 35–38).⁴⁴ The akharas themselves are acutely aware of this, referring to their processions as *naatak* (a staged drama) and *duniya ka khel* (worldly play) (Ramrakha 2002).

In the nineteenth century, the Kumbh Mela was an arena of status communication for sadhus, as it was for other elites, such as notables who publicly distributed charity at mela time (Fusfeld 1974, 75). Consequently, the creation of any new Kumbh Melas would have been met with approval by the sadhus, and their presence at the melas boosted the importance of these events in no small measure for pilgrims. The British, keen to redefine the sadhu's role from militant ascetic to one of holy monk, tolerated

⁴³The original discussion around the legislation indicates that a range of activities normally associated with holy men was targeted, such as nudity while either bathing or in bazaars, tantric practices, and the deformation of parts of the body (such as keeping one arm raised for years), all of which the British considered as merely a means to beg for alms (Farlane 1840).

⁴⁴I am grateful to Philip Lutgendorf for bringing this text to my attention.

and accommodated venues such as the Kumbh to give an arena to the holy monk. Ranajit Guha's comment that "the purpose of such rituals is clearly to empty rebellion of its content and reduce it into a routine of gestures in order to reinforce authority by feigning defiance" well describes the sadhu processions that were overseen by the British at the Kumbh (1983, 31). In effect, even the needs of the government were fulfilled by the new Kumbh. Organizing the mela to the satisfaction of pilgrims frequently ingratiated them to the British,⁴⁵ and the reification of an arena in which the theater of sadhu hegemony could be periodically rehearsed under controlled conditions partially served to contain the sadhus' potential as subversive elements of society.

Conclusion

The Kumbh Mela has been successfully adapted to Allahabad and has arguably become the greatest mela in modern India, even eclipsing its Hardwar namesake.⁴⁶ While there are some religious and enchanted elements at work that emphasize Prayag's sanctity, other forces have promoted the Hardwar Kumbh Mela in Allahabad.⁴⁷ By transcribing the Kumbh Mela festival onto the Magh Mela in the mid-nineteenth century, Pragwals were adapting their tirtha to suit the changing political and economic climate which otherwise may well have left them behind. In effect, the new Kumbh Mela became a vehicle for Pragwal, pilgrim, and sadhu aspirations. By carefully constructing a religious festival, they created for themselves a sphere in which they could enjoy some autonomy in the atmosphere of an increasingly repressive colonial state. Because these aspirations were articulated in the religious genre of the mela, the British conceded an element of sovereignty to them in recognition of the importance of religious freedom or, rather, in fear of the consequences if certain aspects of Indian autonomy within such a sanctified space were denied. Most important, the interpretation of Allahabad as a Kumbh site related it to a tradition which had a history well recognized by the British, so much so that there did not seem to be any invention at all. In the Allahabad Kumbh Mela lies an example of the way in which Indian actors appropriated and manipulated colonial discourse to their own ends: by extending from their own established customs and utilizing the tools of the British state, they found an arena of sovereignty.

⁴⁵Organizing the mela to the satisfaction of pilgrims while simultaneously maintaining order and sanitation was a constant challenge. From the 1880s, complaints about the British administration of the mela were persistent, to the point to which in 1907 the government feared that complaints published in the *Citizen* and reproduced in other northern Indian papers about the mismanagement of the mela could lead to public unrest (Brownrigg 1907).

⁴⁶In terms of numbers alone, the official figures for the 1998 Hardwar Kumbh Mela came in at fifteen million, the same number which had congregated for the Allahabad Kumbh in 1989. Figures for the 2001 Allahabad Kumbh officially stand at thirty million on the most auspicious bathing day alone (24 February); the number of pilgrims over the entire month is officially put at ninety million. The government figures (which were precisely the projected figures and enjoy an intimate relationship with the mela's budget) are contested by many. The 1989 figure is generally accepted, as it secured an entry into the *Guinness Book of World Records* as the world's largest religious assembly of people.

⁴⁷Allahabad is known in Hindu religious texts as *tirtharaj*—"the king of all the holy places"—so called because, "according to a legend, when all the holy shrines were placed on one scale of a balance and Prayag on the other, the former kicked the beam" (Talqudar of Oudh 1916, 299).

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